



**HEALTH & SAFETY COMMITTEE**

Special Meeting | Universal school meals: S.223

Friday, January 24, 2020, 10 a.m.

Skype Conference call option or at 126 State St., 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, Montpelier

**Commissioners present:** Mary Daly, Lisa Carlson, Lisa Senecal

**Advisors present:** Charlie Gliserman, Vermont Early Childhood Advocacy Alliance

**Guests present:** Faye Mack, Advocacy and Education Director, Hunger Free Vermont and Becca Mitchell, Child Nutrition Initiatives Manager, Hunger Free Vermont

**Staff present:** Lilly Talbert

**Presiding:** Mary Daly

**Recording:** Lilly Talbert

Meeting called to order 10:04 a.m.

Mary introduced the subject reporting that she and Lisa Carlson (C.) have been exploring the issue of obesity in Vermont, meeting with experts and service providers to gain knowledge and understanding. Their interests have expanded to nutrition education.

Lisa C. thinks this bill is good start. She likes the local producer purchase piece, the creation of a position in Agency of Education specializing in administration of food programs, bill might provide specific guidelines eliminating sugar and processed foods. Wondering if bill would be better received if it were optional, as Lisa knows communities are concerned with increased costs they already face around education. In Danville 65% of costs would go to community for this program. In NEK policymakers are not inclined to raise the education tax. Lisa C hopes we can find a way to move this issue. Town meetings could be a good venue to advocate for healthy school meals for kids.

Mary lives in Peacham, and reported that property taxes have increased and she, and others are concerned about this expense, although this is important.

Lisa Senecal (S.) reported that the legislation would not mean that individual towns pick up this cost, rather it would be a statewide distribution of funds. In Lamoille county, towns are struggling and have high poverty rates. In Lisa S.'s conversations with teachers in those schools, they report paying for student's meals themselves, and kids need increased services and teacher time and attention due to lack of nutrition. Hungry kids have a hard time focusing. There are secondary costs to not doing this – do guests have data?

Faye of Hunger Free Vermont (HFV) provided an outline of the bills [S.223](#) and [H. 812](#), relating to universal school breakfast and lunch for all public school students:

- Creates 5-year transition period to universal breakfast and lunch served at no charge in all public schools

- Currently the Senate bill includes the Agency of Education position, which Hunger Free VT supports
- 25% of schools are already providing these meals, and this program is currently available to all schools, but it's not required. All meals served via national school meals program and must meet nutrition guidelines (re: caloric content, fat, salt, variety of fruits and veg). Schools engaging in program best practices enable federal reimbursement. Those include timing of meals around recess, etc.
- Currently, school meals are paid for by federal reimbursement, parents/families, state funding from general fund, all that funding doesn't pay for full cost (employee insurance) and the remainder is covered by the school's budget.
- The money would flow from the education fund to the school's budget.
- State has a goal of 20% of school food originating locally, and there is a separate bill in Senate addressing that, perhaps in the future these bills will merge.

Becca's work is directly with schools switching over to this program.

Lisa C. asked, what prevents 75 % of schools from participating?

Faye answers: schools serving more lower income students can participate using SNAP participation numbers. Schools can use another provision not tied to income – but it's more complex. Faye notes that with the unification of districts, some accessing this program and some not, superintendents are opting to include all schools in district. School boards, staff and administration need to understand and invest in the programs. This legislation's mandate would help many schools already needing this or intending to engage, and would provide the budget.

Mary expressed the concern of those with no children, who are retired and on fixed income to cover these costs in taxes.

Faye addressed Mary's concern: currently taxpayers pay for school meals programs, and not as many students eat as would with this universal meal program. Yes, this will increase costs, but it would remove the stigma for lower income students as everyone would eat the same meal, and those on the edge of eligibility would have access to food at school.

Becca spoke about the health impacts of food insecurity. When schools have adopted universal meals, it levels the playing field – makes it safe and inclusive, creating equity and providing for physical and emotional needs of students..

Lisa C. said she was initially skeptical about increased costs. She's engaged in discussions with Cabot school's Brock Miller, and that school's provision 2 plan. They serve food from scratch and more fresh fruits and veg. Students participate in preparation of the meals, and nutrition education. The staff doesn't have to track or collect money from families. Lisa C. notes recent stories of local schools in arrears and they must pursue families for lunch bills. In Danville, Lisa's community, people support kid's needs.

Lisa S. from Stowe remarked on the benefits of a program like this: having a universal menu that all students share; teaching students about nutrition, what foods to eat, how to preparing from scratch, reducing environmental waste, and trying an developing a taste for healthier foods .

Lisa C. observed that because food is part of the curriculum, the results lasts a lifetime

Faye cited studies: obesity rates declined among kids that took part in universal meal programs, due to healthier food choices.

Educational benefit increases - similarly to summer school – equivalent to 10 weeks of school. The Committee requested the study links. Faye and Becca will send, and they spoke about: <https://www.universalschoolmealsvt.org/moreinfo>

Lisa C. said that when Cabot switched to this program, the quality of the food was so improved that purchased meals by staff went from an average of just 10 meals to 170. Becca said that school is a lovely example – the quality makes meals more appealing, students/staff eat more, the school gets more federal funds, and local farms benefit more. Expanding this model to other schools will have similar impacts in health and well-being, and to local economies.

Becca reported that with consolidation due to Act 46, and with school budgets squeezed, it's often challenging for administrators to focus on meals/nutrition.

Faye – asked about how VCW approaches legislation. Lisa S. responded.

In turn, Faye suggested some ideas, with the caveat that it's likely to be a multi-year effort.

- Individuals and VCW could help build understanding with support from HFV. This would involve myth busting – what a school meal can look like.
- Encourage local legislators to attend a school meal at your school.
- Speak up at Town Meeting

Lisa S. asked, of schools adopting universal meals, is the food better quality across the board? As more families participate do they improve because more families are involved?

Faye responded: yes, they increase local food purchasing with fresher ingredients, and as more participants eat, they get more money, and can reach new levels of efficiency, and cook more from scratch. Some schools participate with more creativity than others, depends on staff.

Mary expressed interest in nutrition education in schools.

Lisa C. asked about [HFV's nutrition education hub](#).

Faye said HFV offers curriculum for different ages/audiences. It includes nutrition, cooking skills, food preparation, shopping on a budget, and more. FREE for schools to use. Split into 6-week courses, but the units can be taught individually. Schools have incorporated the curriculum in math and science classes, and of course in cafeteria. ALSO

Farm to school has great tools for how to bring this into the classroom – with focus on fruits and veg

UVM Extension leads school and community group programs

<https://www.hungerfreevt.org/nutrition-ed-hub/resources>

Lisa C. asked how schools receive info on these services.

Becca responded that HFV meets with school admin staff. Community members would be helpful in that connection. Vermont has a robust network of farm to school program initiatives, with lots wrap-around support services. There is a grant program supporting establishing those going to seven schools each year. Next month is a Farm to School Day at the State House. Community members are crucial in making connections and support.

Faye thanked the committee and offered to continue this conversation. VCW could consider joining the list of organizations that support this legislation. Faye will send a detailed list of resources, follow up information, and contact information.

Lisa S. responded that VCW is reticent to sign on, as bill language evolves and changes so significantly over time. VCW does spread the word bills. VCW also provides testimony when appropriate. Commissioners can amplify as community members.

Charlie commented that this bill is part of the Vermont Early Childhood Advocacy Alliance's [legislative agenda](#)

Faye reported that both bills are in the Education committees in both House/Senate. The Senate bill's walk-through was this week. There was an additional informal hearing in Ag committee. The bill has enjoyed tri-partisan widespread enthusiasm. JFO is assembling cost data, released next couple of weeks. The committee requested that data.

Meeting Adjourned at at 11:05.